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EDITORIAL

GENESIS OF A DISPUTE

BYOND THE WRANGLING over budget numbers and turf control, there's an interesting and important debate going on among county officials about the Sullivan County nursing home: Should the care of patients at a public nursing home be entrusted to a private, for-profit company? The public's stake in the outcome of the debate is obvious — it foots the bill for the home in Unity, and it's the family members of Sullivan County residents who use the facility — but it's all but impossible for people not directly involved in the debate to follow what's going on.

About 18 months ago, the county turned to Genesis Health Care to help manage a facility that was becoming an increasing burden to taxpayers. Even those who now wish to reduce or eliminate Genesis' role concede that the nursing home needed help in a number of areas, and the Pennsylvania-based company has brought improvements in such areas as billing, marketing and cost control. Under a contract that pays the company \$200,000 a year (and provides additional money for Genesis employees who are on staff at the home), Genesis has eliminated the home's operating deficit. One major change it has made is to fill more of the nursing home's beds with patients covered by Medicare rather than Medicaid, and who therefore bring a higher level of compensation.

For the coming year, Genesis asked to replace its flat fee with 4 percent of revenues, with a cap of \$450,000. A slim majority of the Sullivan County delegation — House members who represent Sullivan County towns — had a different idea: Thank Genesis for the work it had done and force county commissioners to make a transition back to a purely public institution. They did this on 7-6 vote Monday that cut \$88,000 from the county's \$27 million budget. On Tuesday, two of the three commissioners had yet a different idea: Overrule the delegation by shifting enough money within the budget to continue the relationship with Genesis.

Any number of issues seem to be at play here, including tension between some county delegates and the administrators and commissioners who run the county, but the main one seems to be philosophical: Is it inherently unhealthy to entrust management of a public institution to a company that is bottom-line driven? Rep. Charlotte Houde-Quimby, D-Meriden, for example, believes that there's nothing wrong with hiring private consultants for a fixed period of time, but that public management is crucial to ensuring that saving money doesn't compromise patient care. The county is in good shape to soon resume management, she said, and whatever money would otherwise be going to Genesis can be spent for county purposes or returned to taxpayers.

"These are our neighbors and family members who live there," said Rep. Tom Donovan, D-Claremont. "... By having such a strong relationship with one (private) entity, that will compromise the care we will provide in the future."

The problem with that argument is that those concerned about the cost of the facility can't ignore the fact that Genesis' record is much better than the county's. And while both Donovan and Houde-Quimby say that legitimate concerns have been raised about quality of care since Genesis took over, much of the evidence they present seems to be vague or anecdotal. Both say they are reluctant to be too critical for fear of undermining confidence in the nursing home.

OK, but the only way the public can participate in this debate is to gather that evidence and get as much of it on the table as possible. If the quality of care has suffered, the argument for removing Genesis becomes all but irrefutable. At the same time, Genesis' supporters have an obligation to make clear what they have in mind for the facility's future. When, if ever, do they see the nursing home returning to county management? And what evidence do they have that care has been adequate?

This is too important a debate for it to remain incomprehensible to those who really should be driving the decision — the public.